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THE MENTAL STATUS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO

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A FEW years ago the speaker of the lower house of a state legislature, in delivering the annual address before a college alumni association, chose as his theme the education of the Negro. He argued that the Negro as a race is mentally incapable of any real participation in modern civilization, and that the attempt to educate Negroes should therefore be abandoned.

But at a recent meeting held to consider race relationships in the South, a prominent publicist, pointing out the great progress made by the Negro in this country in the space of two generations, gave it as his opinion that no race could have come so far in so short a time without inherent capacity for civilization equal to that of any other people of history.

Between these extremes lie the views of the great majority of thoughtful students of the problems presented by and confronting the Negro race in America. The intellectual ability of many Negroes is indubitable. The apparently unchangeable stupidity of many others is also indubitable. Generalizing from contact primarily with gifted or with dull representatives of the race, observers have been led to conclusions favoring one extreme view or the other. But in the main they seem to have taken a middle ground to the effect that, while Negroes are often very capable, the general level of intelligence among the masses of the race is considerably below that of whites. That this alleged racial difference can not be removed by education is probably taken for granted, since it is held to be hereditary.

In view of the crucial importance of native intellectual ability for civilized attainment of any sort, it seems to be worth while to summarize the information at present available concerning the intelligence of the Negro as compared with that of the white man. Only through careful, painstaking study and experiment and the gradual development of a scientific psychological technique can the haze of debate and belief be replaced by established knowledge. As yet comparatively little of a scientific nature has been accomplished in investigating the mind of the Negro. But such facts as there are should be incorporated into the thought which is the basis of our action.

By a man's intelligence is meant his ability to think quickly and accurately, to obtain an insight into new problems, to comprehend sit-

uations, to learn easily, to arrive at and apply conclusions, to be mentally alert. Dullness or stupidity is the absence of these abilities. An intelligent man "catches on", apprehends the meanings and significances of things, has "sense" and can meet the demands of life. A dull or stupid person lives in a world in which things and people are relatively simple and arbitrary; he does not know or inquire into the hows and whys of affairs; he can perform routine tasks, but relationships and possibilities are so lacking in his apprehension that he can not meet new situations successfully or devise new ways of acting. To intelligence the complex meaningfulness of life and its institutions is apparent; stupidity cares nothing for such things because it knows nothing of them.

Obviously a man may have excellent intelligence but poor sense organs and power of bodily movement. Keeness of sight, hearing, taste or smell is not necessary to intellectual power, nor is muscular ability. That part of a man's body which determines his intelligence is the cortex or outer rind of his brain, where are found the intricately branching nerve cells and fibers that constitute his "grey matter". The sense organs of Negroes are as efficient as those of whites; the Negro's muscular system is as efficient as the white man's. If there is a difference in intelligence between the two races, its physical counterpart must be looked for in brain differences.

The brain of the average Negro weighs three or four ounces less than the brain of the average white man. But the brain of the average white woman also weighs three or four ounces less than that of the average white man. And while the brains of eminent men, on the average, weigh more than the brains of men in general, yet many men of inferior ability have brains much heavier than those of men of marked attainment, and many men of eminence have brains of much less weight than that of the average tramp. It is therefore evident that brain size does not determine intelligence. And while there are certain differences in the anatomical proportions of the brains of whites and Negroes, such differences are not great and their significance is not well established. Differences that may exist in the constitution of the brain cortex, with which intelligence is most intimately connected, can not be distinguished by the methods of investigation available at the present time.

While there is thus no difference of well established significance between the brains of the two races, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the great differences in physique and feature between typical Negroes and whites are accompanied by correspondingly important neural differences. Unless there be such corresponding neural differences the situation is probably unique among biological phenomena.

The obvious method of attack upon the question of the Negro's intelligence is by means of mental tests. In recent years the general

nature of such tests has become familiar to most people. In general, they aim to measure native or natural intelligence, as distinct from the results of education or training. There are many kinds of tests and they differ greatly in the success with which they accomplish their purpose. But on the whole, when skilfully used, they undoubtedly afford an index of mental capacity vastly superior to unscientific judgments arrived at even after long acquaintance with the persons tested. There have been about a dozen trustworthy investigations of Negro mentality, nearly all of them made within the last decade. And the use of intelligence tests in the army has furnished an unexampled opportunity for psychological study of the Negro soldier.

Before the results of the tests are given, reference should be made to what is probably the best simple method of expressing the relationship between the abilities of groups. The distribution of ability among the individuals of any large and homogeneous group conforms to a well established law. Most of the members of a group are clustered closely around the average, and as the extremes of ability are approached the number of individuals becomes constantly smaller. But the extremes are not exceptions; they are normal variants from the group average, and their number and the amount of their divergence are the same both above and below the average. Thus 50 per cent. of the members of a group equal or exceed the average of that group. Two groups have the same ability if 50 per cent. of the individuals in one of them equal or exceed the average of the other. But if only 10 or 25 or 40 per cent. of group A equal or exceed the average of group B, then group A is inferior to group B. This method of comparing whites and Negroes affords a constant reminder of their "overlapping" in ability and enables us to state the results of different tests in the same terms.

The results of the investigations of whites and Negroes by means of tests have all pointed in the same direction. When Negro children of a given school grade or a given chronological age are compared with white children of the same grade or age, they fall below the intellectual standard of the whites. In the elementary school grades only 20 or 25 per cent. of Negro children equal or exceed the average score of white children. But in high school 30 or 35 per cent. of the Negroes equal or exceed the average white score. That the Negroes do better in the upper grades than in the lower when compared with whites is doubtless due to the fact that a much smaller proportion of Negroes than of whites is found in the upper grades; the Negroes in the upper grades are the selected few of their race to a greater extent than are the whites in the upper grades. It is rarer for a Negro than for a white child to go to school at all; it is much rarer for him to reach high school. This is amply demonstrated by the statistics showing the

school attendance of the two races. And of course it is well recognized that elimination from the successive grades of the school system bears, in general, most heavily upon those pupils who have least capacity, and leaves in the upper grades those in whom ability is greatest. Negroes in the graduate or professional schools of universities probably have as great ability as the average white student there. But the Negroes are far fewer in number.

When the great unselected masses of Negroes in the army were compared with equally unselected masses of whites, the difference between the races, as revealed by the army intelligence tests, was found to be greater than it is in the schools. It was so great, indeed, as to lead to the supposition that the tests were unfair to the Negroes. There were separate tests for literates and for illiterates. The standard of literacy employed was the ability to read a newspaper and to write any sort of letter. Only one-third of the Negro drafted men qualified as literate under this standard, while three-fourths of the white drafted men qualified as literate. On the test for literates, only between 5 and 10 per cent. of the total group of literate Negroes equaled or exceeded the average score of the whites. When the comparison included only men who reported the same number of years of schooling, between 10 and 15 per cent. of the Negroes equaled or exceeded the average score of the whites. On the test for illiterates, the average white score was reached or surpassed by between 10 and 15 per cent. of the Negroes.

This disparity between the scores of the two races is almost certainly due in some measure to the difference in the amount of their education. The tests, and particularly the test for illiterates, were designed as measures of native capacity as opposed to the influence of schooling. But even the handling of a pencil, which the tests required, was probably a greater handicap to the Negroes than to the whites. This supposition is borne out by the results of the widely known Stanford-Binet test, which was employed to examine thousands of drafted men. This is doubtless the most reliable of all intelligence tests; it is adapted to measuring all degrees of ability, from feeble-mindedness to such intellectual capacity as will enable a man to do high grade work in a university; and its results are demonstrably free from any considerable educational influence. On this test, between 20 and 25 per cent. of the Negro recruits equaled or exceeded the performance of the average white recruit. And this is everywhere regarded as one of the best indexes which we have of the relative intelligence of the two races.

But even the Binet test, like nearly all of the others which have been used to measure the intelligence of Negroes, requires, in large measure, the mental manipulation of the verbal symbols of ideas. Very few tests have required thinking in terms of concrete objects. Of course the highest type of intelligence is verbal and symbolic. But Negroes, as a race, live primarily in a world of material things and have less

experience than whites in dealing with the world of words. This in itself may be due to an original racial difference; but it may also be due to social conditions. And it may be unfair to expect Negroes to compete on even terms with whites in dealing with words rather than with things. A few tests involving the handling of concrete materials have indicated that Negroes do somewhat better in them than in the more linguistic tests. It seems to the writer that this should be taken into account in estimating the mental difference of the races, and that probably the safest and most reasonable expression of the relative intelligence of whites and Negroes is that approximately 25 per cent. of the latter equal or exceed the average of the former.

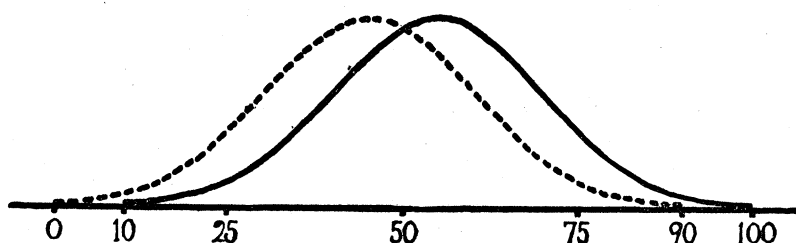


FIG. 1

The diagram exhibits this relationship. The solid curve represents the distribution of ability among whites and the broken curve represents the distribution of ability among Negroes. The curves are drawn in accordance with the law of distribution of individuals in a group, and the relationship between them indicates the relative intelligence of the two races. The figures on the base line are arbitrarily chosen and are intended only to facilitate comparison of the curves. Zero represents the ability of the lowest idiot; 100 represents the ability of the highest genius. The range of ability among the whites is thus indicated as from 10 to 100; among the Negroes it is indicated as from 0 to 90. The height of the respective curves above the base line shows the proportionate number of individuals in the groups at any point on the scale of ability. The average of the whites is approximately 55, while the average of the Negroes is approximately 45. We may express the difference between the averages of the races by saying that it is about one-fifth of the difference between the average white man and the lowest idiot, or one-fifth of the difference between the average white man and the highest genius. As an indication of the remarkable validity and usefulness of the law of group distribution, it may be remarked that Sir Francis Galton, long before the advent of intelligence tests, arrived at approximately this same conclusion as to the average capacities of whites and Negroes by studying only the geniuses of each race, and inferring from their relative abilities the relationship of the races as wholes.

From the diagram it may be computed that approximately 25 per cent. of the Negroes equal or exceed the average ability of the whites, and that approximately 25 per cent. of the whites have ability as low as or below the average ability of the Negroes. In other words, the level of ability reached by half of the whites is reached by only one-fourth of the Negroes, and only one-fourth of the whites are below that level of ability which is the upper limit of half of the Negroes. In passing up the scale from the average to the highest ability, it is evident that the proportion of Negroes to whites constantly decreases until the point is reached, above 90, where there are no Negroes at all. And in passing down the scale from the average to the lowest ability, it is evident that the proportion of Negroes to whites constantly increases until the point is reached, below 10, where there are no whites at all. There are very few Negroes above 75; there are very few whites below 25. The comparatively slight difference between the average abilities of the two groups makes a great difference in the relative proportions of individuals of very high and very low ability in the groups. Thus in the army, on the basis of the intelligence tests, one white recruit in 20 was rated A, or "very superior", while only one Negro recruit in 400 received this rating. And the proportion of feeble-minded individuals among the Negroes was much greater than among the whites.

But it should be noted that while the proportion of Negroes in the higher grades of intelligence is small in comparison with the proportion of whites, there are yet Negroes in the higher grades. Few whites have greater intelligence than the highest of the Negroes, and few Negroes have less intelligence than the dullest of the whites. This fact should not be lost sight of in considerations of the status of the Negro. Nor should it be allowed to obscure the differences that exist between the two races.

Since there is such great overlapping in intelligence between whites and Negroes, it is obviously impossible to make a satisfactory statement of the difference between them in terms of the difference between any two classes of the white population. The ability that is typical of practically any large group of whites is also found among Negroes. And there is great variation in ability among any large group of whites, such as an occupational class. It is probable that there are no two large occupational classes which differ so greatly in ability that there is no overlapping between them. But while this is true, it is yet possible to state, although only suggestively, the difference between the *average* Negro and the *average* white in terms of the difference between the *average* abilities of certain occupational groups of whites. Thus it is probable that the difference in intelligence between the professional and the clerical classes of whites, or the clerical and the semi-skilled labor classes, is not far from equivalent to the difference between

whites and Negroes as groups. It is probable that the intellectual difference between the average policeman or fireman and the average doctor or lawyer, or the difference between the average street car employee or salesgirl and the average elementary teacher or small business man, or the difference between the average tramp and the average groceryman, is not far from equivalent to the difference between the average white and the average Negro. As skilled differs from unskilled labor in intelligence, it is probable that the average white man differs from the average Negro. Or the difference between the races may be expressed as roughly equivalent to the difference between the average white man and unskilled labor, or the difference between the average white man and the clerical classes.

In considering the mental capacity of the Negro, up to this point no account has been taken of the feeling and dynamic sides of mental life as distinguished from the intellectual. It is a common opinion, based upon observation and experience, that the Negro differs more from the white in such traits than in intellect proper. His emotions are generally believed to be strong and volatile in their manifestations; instability of character is ascribed to him; it is contended that he lacks foresight and persistence, that he is improvident and content with immediate satisfactions, that he has small power of serious initiative and that he lacks ambition. Along with high emotionality and instability of character, defective morality is ascribed to him, and the statistical records of crime and sexual immorality are cited in this connection.

At the present time it is impossible to make adequate measurements of these important human traits. If the Negro differs from the white in his manifestations of temperament and character, such differences may be due to the total circumstances of his life rather than to the intrinsic nature of his disposition. It may be that his social condition would produce his alleged characteristics, even if he were possessed of the psychic nature of the white man. On the other hand, it may be that the emotional and dynamic qualities ascribed to the Negro are due to his demonstrable intellectual deficiency, rather than to the inherent strength of his active tendencies. Pronounced and changing expressions of emotion, improvidence of character and a tendency to immoral conduct are not unallied. They are all due to uncontrolled impulse. And a deficient development of the more purely intellectual functions may produce all three. Where the implications of ideas are not apprehended, where thought is not lively and fertile, where meanings and consequences are not grasped, the need for the control of impulse will not be felt. This is strikingly evident in cases of feeble-mindedness. And the supposition that the impulsive life of the Negro is explainable on this basis is reinforced by the common observation

that the lower levels of intelligence among white men are accompanied by traits of character not unlike those ascribed to the Negro. It is among the intelligent classes of whites that uprightness of conduct, self control and foresight in the management of affairs are most generally found. And this is doubtless also true of the more intelligent classes of Negroes.

The term Negro is generally used to refer to all descendants of black stock in America, without regard to the presence of individuals of African lineage other than the true Negro. It is also generally used to refer to the whole colored population, without regard to the presence in it of individuals of mixed white and Negro blood. This paper has followed the general usage. But while little is known concerning the influence of ethnic stocks other than the true Negro, the presence of the so-called mulatto in the colored population complicates all statements of Negro capacity. The term mulatto is employed here to refer to Negroes with any perceptible trace of white blood, regardless of its amount. This is the usage of the United States Census, which states that in 1910 mulattoes constituted approximately one-fifth of the colored population of the country. Since there is an increase in the proportion of mulattoes from decade to decade, due of course in large measure to intermarriage between mulattoes and "pure" Negroes and among the mulattoes themselves, it is probable that they now constitute about one-fourth of the Negroes in America.

The proportion of mulattoes among the colored population is considerably higher in the cities than in the rural districts and it is considerably higher in the North than in the South. It is also considerably higher in the school population than in the colored population at large and it is considerably higher in the upper grades of the school system than in the lower. If this educational distribution of mulattoes were true only for the country as a whole or for entire states it would not be significant, since educational advantages are greater in the North and in the cities, where the greatest proportions of mulattoes are found. But it is true where the educational advantages are the same for all classes of Negroes, as in a given city. And of colored children of a given degree of educational attainment, as those in the same school grade, the mulattoes are generally younger than the pure Negroes. These facts as to the distribution of mulattoes would therefore seem to indicate that they have greater ability and energy than pure Negroes. They are apparently more ready to perceive and to take advantage of the reputed opportunities of Northern and urban life. And they are apparently more ready to perceive the advantages of education and to make progress in school work.

The supposition that mulattoes have greater ability than pure Negroes is borne out by the results of mental tests. It is doubtless true that skin color is not an accurate index of the amount of white

blood in an individual. But when considerable numbers of Negroes in the schools are classified on the basis of skin color and compared age by age or grade by grade, it is found that those of lighter color obtain higher average scores on intelligence tests than those who are darker. Where there have been as many as four groups in the classification, corresponding roughly to pure Negroes, Negroes three-fourths pure, mulattoes proper and quadroons, it has been found that the average scores of the lighter classes were successively higher than those of the darker. And when several thousand Negroes in the army were similarly classified, the results of the army intelligence tests showed that the Negroes with the greater amount of white blood, as indicated by skin color, obtained uniformly higher average scores on a given test than those with less white blood. A summary of the test results indicates that roughly 20 per cent. of the pure Negroes, 25 per cent. of the Negroes three-fourths pure, 30 per cent. of the true mulattoes and 35 per cent. of the quadroons equal or exceed the average score of comparable whites.

It is worthy of note in this connection that when the Negro recruits in the army were classified on the basis of literacy, it was found that the percentage of mulattoes among the literates was approximately twice as great as among the illiterates, and that this was true when both literates and illiterates were from the same draft area. Indeed, the difference in skin color between the literates and the illiterates was such that after the illiterates had been eliminated from a company the complexion of the group remaining was noticeably lighter to casual observation. It is also worthy of note that the Northern Negroes obtained higher average scores on a given test than the Southern, and that the urban Negroes obtained higher average scores than the rural.

While mulattoes as a group have greater intellectual capacity than pure Negroes, the overlapping in ability between the two classes is very great. It is greater than the overlapping between mulattoes and whites, since the greater number of mulattoes have a preponderance of Negro blood and since probably a majority of them are descendants of inferior elements of the general population. But even a slight difference in capacity between Negroes of pure and of mixed blood would produce a considerable difference in the number of individuals of great ability in the two classes. According to the relative size of the total groups of mulattoes and pure Negroes, there should be three or four times as many persons of marked attainment in the latter as in the former. But the difference in capacity between the two groups leads to the supposition, which is supported by a not unfounded general belief, that there are at least as many mulattoes as pure Negroes among the leaders of the race in this country. The matter can not be conclusively decided, however, because of the lack of satisfactory lists of col-

ored men of attainment and because there is no sure indication of the amount of white blood possessed by individuals included in such lists as we have.

It is not unlikely that the presence of the mulatto may affect the interracial relationship in America. His presence will tend to raise the standard of colored achievement. But it may also tend to increase race friction. The mulatto thinks and feels more nearly as does the white man, and he is therefore probably less content than is the pure Negro with a position of racial subordination. And the proportion of mulattoes among the colored population will undoubtedly continue to increase. There is no evidence for the opinion sometimes expressed that the death rate of mulattoes is higher than that of pure Negroes. On the contrary, there is evidence that the colored professional classes, which contain a very high proportion of mulattoes, have a lower death rate than the race as a whole.

The mental difference between whites and Negroes in general indicates that there should be a difference in the organization of the schools of the two races. The public elementary school course, both North and South, is adapted to the ability of those white children who are most nearly average in capacity. But since only the most capable of the Negroes, roughly one-fourth of the total number, equal or exceed the average of white ability, it is unreasonable to expect Negroes as a group to make satisfactory progress in the public schools as now organized. That they do not make satisfactory progress is well known. Much of their lack of success is due to poor attendance and to unfavorable school and home conditions. These adverse social factors are found particularly in the South, where there are separate schools for the two races. But even in the North, where compulsory education laws obtain and where the same schools are attended by both races, the amount of retardation among colored pupils is far greater than among white. The psychological backwardness of colored children is everywhere paralleled by their educational backwardness. It would more nearly accord with all known facts concerning the intellectual ability of the Negro, if the elementary schools for colored children were so organized as to allow them an additional year for completion of the course. In a number of school systems for white children the grades are now so arranged that an additional year is allowed the slower third or fourth of the pupils. This arrangement for the slower white pupils should probably be made the basal plan for colored schools.

The content of the course of study for Negroes should be determined by social factors rather than by psychological. But in this connection it may be noted that the Negro, when compared with the white, seems to have relatively greater capacity to deal with the concrete, the

tangible and the practical than with the abstract, the symbolic and the theoretical. He is highly capable in sensory and motor capacities and in native retentiveness; his shortcomings are logical or rational and more purely intellectual. He is well equipped for manual and industrial training and for acquiring the simpler skills. It is a common observation of teachers that colored children excel in handwriting and in rote memory work. It would seem that the nature of the mental equipment of the Negro lends sanction to the movement to render his schools less literary and "cultural" and more "practical" and vocational.

But since very able colored persons are found in every large group of Negroes, though the proportion of such individuals is much smaller than among whites, opportunities for advanced and professional education should be open to them. The widely held doctrine that the Negro's mental growth ceases at adolescence finds no sanction in experimental studies of his ability. And there is no reliable evidence that the variability of Negroes above and below their racial type is appreciably less than the variability of white men.

Psychological study of the Negro indicates that he will never be the mental equal of the white race. But the Negro in America is capable of great progress. Conditions in various small Negro republics, such as Haiti, Santo Domingo and Liberia, are frequently cited as evidence that the race is incapable of developing a high degree of civilization, and such arguments are not without their value. But in America the colored population is larger than in any of the Negro republics, and the progress of a group depends upon its size as well as upon its average capacity. The larger group will produce more individuals of great ability, and such individuals furnish ideas and inspiration for the whole group. And in America the Negro is in much closer contact with the white race than he is in the isolated Negro states. This contact gives him the advantages of white encouragement, achievement, example and control, and enables him to appropriate to his own use the products of white genius. Races or nations between which there is free intercommunication make greater progress than do isolated peoples, since the results of the ability of each race are more readily taken over and incorporated into the life of the other. It is therefore reasonable to expect the Negroes of America to reach a higher level of attainment than those of their race who are differently situated, even though the native ability of the Negro be everywhere the same.